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GENERAL ISRAEL PUTNAM,

THE

COMMANDER AT BUNKER HILL.

By SAMUEL ADAMS DRAKE.

[*To accompany Drake's "Bunker Hill."*]

NICHOLS & HALL, BOSTON.

1875.

GENERAL ISRAEL PUTNAM,

THE

COMMANDER AT BUNKER HILL.

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THE writer did not purpose to renew the old controversy as to the officer entitled to be considered first in command at the battle of Bunker Hill; at the same time, he did not mean to be silent, if the subject should again become one of discussion. In the brief sketch which precedes the narratives of British officers present at the battle, he felt that he could not appropriately enter upon the question of command, for the reason assigned, and because a simple declaration, if unsupported by argument or authority, would count for nothing more than an expression of opinion.

The subject having been revived in the interest of Colonel Prescott as the commander in the battle, and the writer having seen that after this long silence the claim of Colonel Prescott was urged as if there were really no longer any question of his title; nor a claimant who might successfully dispute it, he now feels the time to have arrived to enter his emphatic protest against both assumptions.

There is a wide difference between the command of a particular post on a battle-field, to which an officer is assigned by the order of a superior, and the command of a field of battle which embraces other positions of perhaps equal importance. Authorities are found, some of them being nearly contemporaneous with the event, — the foundation of those that have since appeared, — which simply assign to Colonel Prescott the command at the re-

doubt. This specific statement has been understood by many to imply the chief command of the field of battle; and though the distinction may be one well understood by all who have carefully studied the operations at Bunker Hill, it is one to which the writer believes it necessary at the outset to call attention.

The question who is entitled to be considered as commanding in the battle of Bunker Hill is a strictly military one. No written orders concerning the events of the day are in existence. There is no proof that any ever did exist. It becomes necessary, therefore, to apply well-known principles of military law to the acts of the leaders themselves.

According to the usage of armies engaged in active operations, an officer detached upon a service which is likely to bring on an engagement would only be entitled to command in a resulting battle under certain circumstances, every one of which is to be kept in view. If he remained within the active supervision and control of the commander-in-chief of the army to which he belonged, the conditions under which he found himself temporarily commanding might be wholly changed, and demand entirely different dispositions. For example, if the officer commanding the detachment was in danger of being overpowered, and was obliged to solicit reinforcements, he must submit himself to the altered state of affairs, and take the risk of becoming subordinate to a superior officer, should such an officer arrive on the field with the knowledge and approval of the general-in-chief. This was precisely the condition of affairs at Bunker Hill.

On the other hand, as long as the officer commanding the detachment is able to maintain himself in his original *status*, and does not call for aid, it is inconsistent with military courtesy for an officer of superior rank to supersede him. A colonel commanding a detachment on a special service might be attacked by a superior force, and a general of his own army might come to his aid with reinforcements. The general might assume command; but would do so upon his own responsibility, and would be answerable to their common superior for any complications that might arise from his act. In other words, military rank does not always entitle an officer to com-

mand. If this were otherwise, it would subject an officer engaged in a special service, for which he had been duly selected, to the interference of a superior, who might wish to reap the glory belonging to the inferior. There is no nicer point in military etiquette than this ; but, in deciding it, all the peculiar circumstances of a battle, which are usually beyond human power to foresee, must be taken into account ; and each officer must bear the responsibility which belongs to him, — the superior of giving orders, the inferior of resisting them.

Mr. Frothingham says, on this point, when speaking of General Putnam : ¹ “ In a regularly organized army, his appearance on the field, by virtue of his rank, would have given him the command.” It will be seen that the writer differs with this author in stating what is military usage. But he here distinctly refuses to allow General Putnam the command, because of the disorganized condition of the provincial army, which he names an “ army of allies, whose jealousies had not yielded to the vital principle of subordination.” That is to say, the troops of each colony considered themselves independent of the orders of an officer of a different colony. What has this insubordination or jealousy to do with the troops who at Bunker Hill proved subordinate and amenable to orders : those who, in fact, fought the battle ? Were these objections sound, would they not be necessarily fatal to the claim of Colonel Prescott, who, if he is to be proved the rightful commander at Bunker Hill, must be shown to have commanded troops of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire, having officers who ranked him ? But the allegation is not true, and the conflict of authority arising from ignorance, insubordination, or cowardice has been left out of view. It is a sufficient answer to this argument that the troops all repaired to the field by the order of General Ward, a Massachusetts officer, or of General Putnam, a Connecticut officer ; that those of Connecticut obeyed the orders of Colonel Prescott, and those of New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, the orders of General Putnam.

¹ “ Siege of Boston,” p. 168.

The provincial army was inchoate, it is true, but it embodied all the essential features of a mobilized force, having regiments and battalions formed on a recognized system, and commanded by proper officers. It had infantry and artillery. It had an acknowledged head, General Ward, whose orders were respected. To say that no officer could be considered as commanding, because of the lack of discipline and *morale* in the troops, and the want of experience in the officers of inferior grade, is to allege that General McDowell did not command at Bull Run, because his army was precisely in this condition. To assert that no officer could command, because forces of the different colonies, now for the first time acting together, did not cordially co-operate, is to deny that Wellington commanded the Spanish armies in the Peninsular War, because they were notoriously insubordinate.

It is claimed for Colonel Prescott that he was the proper commanding officer at the battle of Bunker Hill, because he was sent with the original detachment of a thousand men to erect intrenchments. General Ward commanded the whole army, with head-quarters at Cambridge, three miles distant from the battle-field. He had a number of general officers subject to his orders, and a considerable body of troops. It is admitted that after the discovery of Prescott's works by the enemy, and when all indications pointed to an immediate engagement, reinforcements were urgently solicited of General Ward by General Putnam in person, and by Colonel Prescott through John Brooks; and that they were despatched from time to time in consequence of these solicitations.

If not already advised of General Putnam's active participation in the operations on the field, General Ward, beyond a question, thus became aware of the fact. He must have known that Putnam, after visiting him from the front, had immediately returned there. The conclusion, therefore, is unavoidable, that Putnam's participation was with the full knowledge and approval of General Ward. If that officer had meant that Colonel Prescott should retain the command under any and all circumstances that might arise, it was his plain duty to have prevented the interference of another officer who outranked

him. The knowledge of the fact was his approval. It was not enough to have ignored it: he should have forbade it imperatively. By not doing so, he became as much responsible as if he had ordered it.

The question of precedence of rank was one well understood by such men as Ward, Putnam, and Prescott, who had all served under the old monarchical system, where the rule of subordination was inflexible, and blind, unreasoning obedience to a superior the fundamental law of armies. Upon this system the provincial and continental armies were formed. Where an officer is now required to obey only the lawful orders of a superior, it would then have been considered equivalent to insubordination to question them. There was no greater stickler for the deference due to rank than General Ward.

It is just to conclude, inasmuch as the operations of the day of battle depended wholly upon what the enemy might do, — with what force he might attack, and at what point, — that the counter-movements originating at the American headquarters developed themselves accordingly; and that what was originally a proper operation for a colonel's command now called for a larger view, more troops, and an officer or officers of higher rank. Especially is this judgment of the case confirmed when it is considered that the British commander-in-chief sent a force not much in excess of two thousand men under the command of a major-general (Howe), with a subordinate brigadier-general (Pigot), and that a third (Clinton) was on the field before the close of the battle.

General Ward despatched from first to last not fewer than four thousand men to Bunker Hill; not all reached there, but they were put in motion. If, when having general officers of experience at hand, he had omitted to put them on duty, he would either have been criminally culpable or have exhibited remarkable incapacity. In either case he would justly have incurred the responsibility of defeat, to say nothing of the proper resentment of every general officer subject to his orders. But he had, in fact, recognized General Putnam as in command.

Generals Warren and Pomeroy were also upon the battle-

field, but both preferred to act as volunteers. General Heath, the contemporary of the principal actors at Bunker Hill, relates, more than twenty years after the battle, in his "Memoirs," the following incident: ¹ —

"In the time of action, Colonel Prescott observing that the brave General Warren was near the works, he immediately stepped up to him, and asked him if he had any orders to give him. The General replied that he had none, that he exercised no command there,—‘the command,’ said the General, ‘is yours.’” General Heath makes this statement clear when he also says that Colonel Prescott “was the proper commanding officer at the redoubt, and nobly acted his part as such during the whole action.” There is now no one to dispute that Colonel Prescott commanded at the redoubt, as Colonel Stark commanded at the rail-fence,—a post fully as important, considering that one could not have been held without the other. As a matter of courtesy, Prescott offered the command *of the redoubt* to Warren, nothing more.

Eliot, the biographer, says on this point: “Colonel Prescott commanded the party within the lines, and Colonel Stark the men who were without behind a rail-fence, and did such amazing execution by a well-directed fire.” ² “Within the lines” is supposed to mean within the redoubt, as the defences were confined to the redoubt, the redan, or breastwork, and the rail-fence. Mr. Frothingham does not quote this authority.

Mr. Frothingham concludes that Putnam “was present rather as the patriotic volunteer than as the authorized commander;” ³ and in the same paragraph he asserts that “Putnam was applied to for orders by the reinforcements that reached the field, and he gave orders without being applied to.” He thus consigns Putnam to the same passive condition with Warren, whom he believes to have distinctly refused the command; and with Pomeroy, in whose behalf no claim is put forward. By what process of reasoning Putnam is set

¹ Heath's "Memoirs," p. 20.

² Eliot's "Biographical Dictionary." Boston, 1809. John Eliot, D.D., was pastor of the New North Church, Boston.

³ "Siege of Boston," p. 168.

down a volunteer, while exercising command, is not explained.

It is claimed also for Prescott that because he commanded at the redoubt he commanded the whole field. Mr. Frothingham, who is understood to take this view, observes, in regard to Colonel Prescott:¹ "Nor is there any proof that he gave an order at the rail-fence, or on Bunker Hill. But he remained in the redoubt, and there fought the battle with such coolness, bravery, and discretion, as to win the unbounded applause of his countrymen." The battle-field properly embraced the heights of Bunker Hill and Breed's Hill, covered by an extended line from the Charles River to the Mystic. This line consisted of a redoubt, in which fewer than five hundred men could be advantageously posted; an embankment, without a ditch on its left flank; and a long line of fence, extemporized into a breastwork by the troops of Knowlton, Stark, &c. The redoubt was on the right, the other defences prolonging the line to the Mystic. The redoubt was not the key to this position, because the moment the rail-fence was forced it became untenable. The weight of the first and second attacks was borne by the defenders of the rail-fence, where General Howe in person attacked, with the very flower of his army, supported by artillery. The selection of the best troops—all his light-infantry and grenadiers—for this attack, together with his personal superintendence of it, fixes this point decisively. Howe meant to break the American left and take the works in reverse. He persisted in this plan until the troops which he led were virtually annihilated. Of two companies each, the King's Own lost four officers and forty-three men, the Welsh Fusileers, four officers and fifty-three men; and the whole of the grenadier company of the 52d regiment were either killed or wounded. This was the proportion of casualties on this side, occasioned by a fire so murderous that even Howe, fire-eater that he was, shrank from a third attack.

Mr. Frothingham again says: "The brow of Bunker Hill was a place of great slaughter. General Putnam here rode to the rear of the retreating troops, and, regardless of the balls

¹ "Siege of Boston," p. 166.

flying about him, with his sword drawn, and still undaunted in his bearing, urged them to renew the fight in the unfinished works. 'Make a stand here!' he exclaimed. 'We can stop them yet!'" Here, then, was the crisis of the battle come to the very point which Putnam had from first to last endeavored with such unflagging perseverance to render defensible. There can be little doubt that a second line of works here would have stopped the British advance, and perhaps have retrieved the day; for at this moment large reinforcements were either arriving on, or were within reach of, the ground. Who believes that, with the terrible lesson he had received on Breed's Hill, Howe would not have taken time to reflect before storming a second line of intrenchments, defended by a larger force than had yet confronted him?

It is true that Putnam, supposing him to have remained the victor in an attack on this new position of Bunker Hill, would have been inexcusable not to have withdrawn his troops from the peninsula in the night. Yet this has nothing to do with the importance which that hill obtained from its commanding the whole peninsula, Breed's Hill included, or which it acquired after that position had been evacuated.

It is agreed that on the night of the sixteenth of June, 1775, a detachment of a thousand men were sent under the orders of Colonel Prescott to seize and fortify Bunker Hill.¹ This was a specific order, and went no further than the language imports. To defend the works, either before or after their completion, until relieved by competent authority, was his duty as a soldier, and did not require an order. Colonel Prescott therefore marched to the point indicated with his thousand men,—a colonel's command,—and began to intrench. He had the honor of being singled out of the whole army for this delicate and dangerous enterprise. This is the

¹ Prescott's letter to John Adams is accepted as evidence of the order. It, however, says Breed's Hill was the one to which he was ordered. As in all the preliminary steps taken by the Committee of Safety Bunker Hill was proposed for fortification, I conclude the recollection of Prescott to have been faulty on this point. Moreover, the account of the Committee, as in its records, states that "by some mistake" Breed's Hill was selected. There is confusion in the different statements, which it is not essential to my argument to discuss.

order that is relied upon to establish Colonel Prescott as commanding-in-chief during the battle of the seventeenth of June.

Although in command of a force detached for a specific object, it appears that Prescott's operations were supervised from the beginning by higher authority. On arriving on the ground indicated, a discussion arose whether Bunker Hill or Breed's Hill should be selected for laying out the works. In the consultation that ensued, two general officers, one of whom was Putnam, took part. The other general is believed to have been Pomeroy. "On the pressing importunity of one of the generals," says Gray's letter,¹ "it was concluded to proceed to Breed's Hill." "Putnam, as we know from his son and Stephen Codman, Esq., and Gridley, as we know from Colonel Henshaw, had previously reconnoitred the ground."² Two general officers, then, were present before ground was broken, and relieved Prescott from the responsibility of a decision between Bunker and Breed's Hills. General Putnam, who either marched with the detachment or joined it on the route, appears thus early in the active movements preceding the battle, exerting an important, if not a commanding, influence in deciding the proper site for the intrenchments.

"At the same time," says Swett, "it was determined that a work should be erected on Bunker Hill as a new post and rallying point to resort to, should the enemy drive them from the first, and for the protection of the rear."³ This was doubtless Putnam's project, as he appears on the day of battle never to have lost sight of it, — striving with the utmost solici-

¹ "Siege of Boston," Appendix.

² Colonel Samuel Swett (p. 20, "Bunker Hill Battle"), whose account, published in 1826, is the basis of subsequent ones.

Judge Grosvenor, in his letter to Daniel Putnam, "Pomfret, April 20th, 1818," published in the "Analectic Magazine" of the same year, asserts that the detachment was ordered "to march to Breed's Hill, where, under the immediate superintendence of General Putnam, ground was broken and a redoubt formed." Judge Grosvenor, was with the Connecticut troops who marched with Prescott, and was wounded in the ensuing battle.

Gray says (Appendix, "Siege of Boston," p. 394), "The engineer and two generals went on the hill at night and reconnoitred the ground."

³ Swett, p. 21, "Bunker Hill Battle."

itude, and using every means in his power to carry it into effect. It is necessary not to forget this circumstance: it had an important bearing on the subsequent fortunes of the day.

Leaving Colonel Prescott to finish his works, Putnam returned to his camp, according to Swett, to prepare for the anticipated crisis, by bringing on reinforcements and securing a fresh horse. At daybreak he was again in the saddle. Hearing the cannonade opened by the enemy, he abandoned the idea of conducting the reinforcements himself, but reminded General Ward "that the fate of the expedition depended on his being reinforced immediately, according to the preconcerted plan, and flew to join his men on the hill."¹ At nine o'clock, Putnam, by the same authority, was again at head-quarters, urging reinforcements. Frothingham says: "General Ward, early in the morning, had been urged by General Putnam to send reinforcements to Colonel Prescott."² By this testimony, General Ward was fully aware of Putnam's presence on the field. On his way back to the heights, after his second application to General Ward, Putnam was met by John Brooks, who was proceeding to Cambridge on foot, and by Prescott's order, to represent the necessity of a reinforcement.³ Putnam and Prescott were both agreed on this important question.

The result of the application of one or both was that an order was sent to Colonel Stark at Medford to send two hundred men to reinforce the lines at Breed's Hill, which was promptly answered by despatching the men under Lieutenant-colonel Wyman. At two o'clock, says Stark, in his letter to Matthew Thornton, "an express arrived for my whole regiment to proceed to Charlestown."⁴

Having now reached that point where the question of command becomes properly a matter for discussion, where the

¹ Swett, pp. 21, 24.

² "Siege of Boston," p. 128.

³ On the day of the battle, says General Burbeck, who was then with the army, "General Putnam rode between Charlestown and Cambridge without a coat, in his shirt-sleeves, and an old felt hat on, to report to General Ward, and to consult on further operations." Swett, on the "Commander at Bunker Hill," p. 39.

⁴ Frothingham says the order was despatched "about eleven o'clock."

situation of Colonel Prescott undergoes a complete change, and where, from being a principal, he became a subordinate, the acts of General Putnam and of Colonel Prescott will show who exercised the functions of commanding officer over the whole field of battle.

COLONELS STARK AND REED.

Who gave orders to Colonels Stark and Reed, and posted their regiments when they came on the field? Not Prescott, for he is always at his post in the redoubt. Even Mr. Frothingham admits that there is no proof that Prescott gave Stark an order during the day. Swett says positively,¹ in regard to the New Hampshire troops, that "Putnam reserved a part of this force to throw up the work on Bunker Hill, and ordered the remainder to press on to the lines as quick as possible, and join the Connecticut troops at the rail-fence. Stark encouraged them by a short, spirited address, ordered three cheers to animate them, and they moved on rapidly to the line." Edward Everett says, in his biography of Stark:² "A portion of them (the New Hampshire troops) were detached by General Putnam to work upon the intrenchments of Bunker Hill, properly so called. The residue, under their colonels, Stark and Reed, were ordered to take post at Captain Knowlton's position just described. On receiving this order, Colonel Stark made a brief and animated address to his men, and marched them off to the station designated." Who gave Colonels Stark and Reed these orders? Not Colonel Prescott; he was in the redoubt at the front line, and this incident took place on Bunker Hill. Mr. Frothingham says, "General Putnam ordered part of these troops to labor on the works begun on Bunker Hill," &c. There is, then, no disagreement that Colonels Stark and Reed received and obeyed the orders of General Putnam, detaching their troops; and as it is not pretended that any other general officer was at this point, the inference is a proper

¹ "Bunker Hill Battle," p. 28.

² Spark's "American Biography," vol. i. p. 60.

one, — that it was also Putnam who posted these commands in the line.

This was the most important reinforcement that arrived on the field. It was ordered there by General Ward, reported to, or was halted by General Putnam on Bunker Hill, and was posted by him where it fought. Stark intrenched in his front, as Prescott had done, and like him became another integral part of the American line, — neither applying to Prescott for orders nor receiving any from him. It is evident that General Ward did not direct Stark to report to Colonel Prescott as the commander of the field; and yet, if he had been the proper commander, Stark should have reported to him, and to no other. Swett states that, on the British advance towards the American lines, Putnam led the troops he had detained on Bunker Hill into action.

What does Colonel Prescott say of this large reinforcement, in number at least equal to the original detachment? “There was a party of Hampshire, in conjunction with some other forces, lined a fence at the distance of threescore rods back of the fort, partly to the north.” In his letter to John Adams, from which this fragment is extracted, Prescott always says, “I commanded,” or “I ordered,” where he had done either. Prescott here virtually acknowledges that after these reinforcements, which he had urgently solicited, were sent to him, and came upon the field, he neither sent them orders nor was applied to for any; yet, if he were the proper commanding officer of the whole field, it was his duty to have posted these troops. It is nowhere shown that he made any attempt to control them in any way. This circumstance alone narrows Prescott’s command to his own part of the field.

PUTNAM AT THE REDOUBT.

It has been broadly asserted that Putnam did not give Prescott an order on the field of battle. The evidence to the contrary rests partly upon the hearsay testimony before alluded to of General Heath. Although I should have preferred to intro-

duce only the written declarations of actors in the battle, those writers who have attached full credit to the relation of General Heath cannot object to its appearance in opposition to their conclusions.

“Just before the action began, General Putnam came to the redoubt and told Colonel Prescott that the intrenching tools must be sent off, or they would be all lost; the Colonel replied that if he sent any of the men away with the tools, not one of them would return. To this the General answered, They shall every man return. A large party was then sent off with the tools, and not one of them returned: in this the Colonel was the best judge of human nature.”¹

The language here is that General Putnam “*told Colonel Prescott that the intrenching tools must be sent off.*” I do not know what the generally received opinion may be as to the usual language of an order; but the sole object being to secure obedience, the only thing material is that it should be obeyed and respected, in whatever language it may be couched. “Colonel Prescott, the intrenching tools *must* be sent off, or they will be lost,” is certainly emphatic enough to cover the case in question. The Colonel remonstrated, according to General Heath; yet, considering that he had been told he “must” send the tools, he did not refuse obedience, but sent them, — a very proper act for a subordinate; a very singular one in a commander of the field, especially when in violation of his own judgment. But General Putnam left him no alternative, and he sent a detachment with the tools, as directed.

Mr. Frothingham asserts² of the redoubt: “General officers came to this position, but they did not give him (Prescott) an order, nor interfere with his dispositions.” If General Putnam did not “give him an order,” nor “interfere with his dispositions,” in this instance, I am at a loss how to characterize his appearance at the redoubt, his language in regard to the intrenching tools, and his overbearing Prescott in so unofficerlike a manner. He was certainly the most disorderly “volunteer” that has ever come under my observation.

¹ Heath's “Memoirs.” Boston, 1798, pp. 19, 20.

² “Siege of Boston,” p. 166.

I think military men will agree that the language of an order comes within the discretion of the officer who gives it. The only vital thing about it is, that it should clearly express the thing to be done, be properly addressed, and signed by the superior, with his title. These acts are performed when the superior elects to carry his own order. I do not believe an inferior would escape responsibility for disobeying a request of his commander, if the above conditions were complied with. It is true that General Putnam did not mount the parapet of the redoubt, flourish his drawn sword above Prescott's head, and say: "I command you to send away the tools!" But his language had all the meaning, and, as we have seen, the full effect, of such an order.

THE TESTIMONY OF AN ENEMY.

Something further about the redoubt. In 1818, when General Dearborn made an unprovoked attack upon the memory of General Putnam, the painter Trumbull — whose "Bunker Hill" is, more than any other, familiar to all classes — noticed its appearance in a letter to the General's son, Daniel Putnam, in which he expressed his unmeasured indignation.¹ After some preliminary remarks, which I have not the space to give, Colonel Trumbull observes: "In all cases like this, perhaps the most unquestionable testimony is that which is given by an enemy."

"In the summer of 1786 I became acquainted in London with Colonel John Small, of the British army, who had served in America many years, and had known General Putnam intimately during the war of Canada, from 1756 to 1763. From him I had the following anecdote respecting the battle of Bunker Hill. I shall nearly repeat his words. Looking at the picture which I had then almost completed, he said: 'I don't like the situation in which you have placed my *old friend* PUTNAM; you have not done him justice. I wish you would alter that part of your picture, and introduce a circumstance which

¹ Trumbull was in the camp at Roxbury at the time of the battle. He has painted Colonel Small in the foreground of his picture.

actually happened, and which I can never forget. When the British troops advanced the second time to the attack of the redoubt, I, with the other officers, was in the front of the line to encourage the men. We had advanced very near the works undisturbed, when an irregular fire, like a *feu de joie*, was poured in upon us. It was cruelly fatal. The troops fell back; and, when I looked to the right and left, I saw not one officer standing. I glanced my eye to the enemy, and saw several young men levelling their pieces at me. I knew their excellence as marksmen, and considered myself gone. At that moment my old friend PUTNAM rushed forward, and, striking up the muzzles of their pieces with his sword, cried out, "For God's sake, my lads, don't fire at that man; I love him as I do my brother." We were so near each other, that I heard his words distinctly. He was obeyed; I bowed, thanked him, and walked away unmolested.' " 1

Colonel Small asserted positively — and he was not likely to be mistaken in a matter of life or death to him — that Putnam was at the redoubt, gave a command not to fire, and was obeyed. Mr. Frothingham says Putnam did not give an order there. Great confidence is felt in the statement of Colonel Small. He was so near General Putnam that he recognized him, and heard his voice distinctly. The physiognomy of Putnam was little likely to have been mistaken for another by an old comrade of nearly twenty years' standing.²

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL ABERCROMBIE.

This distinguished officer, another old companion-in-arms of Putnam, seems also to have recognized him in the front of battle. He was shot down while leading his men to the assault. "He was a brave and noble-hearted soldier; and when the men were bearing him from the field, he begged them to spare his

¹ Mr. Frothingham mentions, page 148, the arrival on the field of the second reinforcement of marines, under Major Small. It is well known that these troops attacked the redoubt.

² Several depositions assert Putnam was at the redoubt.

old friend Putnam." "If you take General Putnam alive," he said, "don't hang him ; for he's a brave man."¹ He died on the 24th of June.

CAPTAIN KNOWLTON AND THE RAIL-FENCE.

Captain Thomas Knowlton commanded the detachment of Connecticut troops that marched with Colonel Prescott on the evening of the sixteenth. Although he left the redoubt by order of Colonel Prescott, he did not, as Mr. Frothingham states he did, begin the construction of the rail-fence by Prescott's direction. Colonel Prescott tells what was done by this detachment. He says : "About two o'clock in the afternoon, on the seventeenth, the enemy began to land a north-easterly point from the fort, and I ordered the train, with two field-pieces, to go and oppose them, and the Connecticut forces to support them ; but the train marched a different course, and, I believe, those sent to their support followed, — I suppose, to Bunker Hill." Colonel Prescott thus admits a want of knowledge as to the movement of the guns and of Knowlton, with the supports, after they left the redoubt. They, at any rate, marched "a different course" from that indicated by him. His "belief" was that they went to Bunker Hill. Now, as Knowlton was the first to man the rail-fence, near the base of Bunker Hill, it is evident that Prescott not only did not order this line to be occupied, but his language justifies the opinion that he considered it a disobedience of his commands.

The authority of three persons is given, one of whom, Grosvenor, says Putnam ordered Knowlton to this position ; Judge Winthrop saw Putnam here just previous to the first attack ; and Simeon Noyes declares that Putnam rode up to the company he was in, and said : "Draw off your troops here," pointing to the rail-fence, "and man the rail-fence ; for the enemy's flanking us fast."² Swett says unqualifiedly that it was Putnam who ordered Knowlton here.³

¹ "Siege of Boston," p. 195.

² Ibid. p. 134.

³ Swett, "Bunker Hill," p. 26.

WHO POSTED THE ARTILLERY?

Prescott, it has been seen, ordered the guns that were with him at the redoubt to a position they did not take, but moved off to the rear. They are stated to have fired a few rounds from the interval between the earth breastwork and rail-fence, and to have then limbered up and retired. Captain Callender took his two pieces over Bunker Hill, apparently with the intention of leaving the ground. While retreating, Callender, a Massachusetts officer, was met by Putnam, who has fortunately left a record in this case of what then occurred.

Gridley and Callender were tried by court-martial and dismissed the service.¹ A committee of the Massachusetts Congress applied to General Putnam "and other officers who were in the heat of the engagement for further intelligence." General Putnam informed them that, "in the late action, as he was riding up Bunker Hill, he met an officer in the train drawing his cannon down in great haste; he ordered the officer to stop and go back; he replied he had no cartridges; the General dismounted and examined his boxes, and found a considerable number of cartridges, upon which he ordered him back; he refused, until the General threatened him with immediate death; upon which he returned up the hill again, but soon deserted his post, and left the cannon."²

This is emphatic: while Prescott saw the artillery retreat, and in disobedience to his orders, without any endeavor to recall it, Putnam compelled an officer to return with it, and to take the post he directed, on pain of death.

These two guns were served by Putnam himself after they had been abandoned.³ Mr. Frothingham, referring to the final abandonment by Callender of his guns, tells us that "about this time Captain Ford's company, of Bridge's regiment, came on to the field, and, at the pressing request of General Putnam, drew the deserted pieces to the rail-fence." A deposition of

¹ The latter afterwards nobly wiped away the disgrace.

² See note, p. 581, "Journals of Provincial Congress."

³ See letter of Adjutant Waller, p. 23, "Bunker Hill:" "In these breastworks they had artillery, which did so much mischief."

one of Ford's men states that Putnam ordered Ford to do this. Here is another Massachusetts officer obeying the orders of General Putnam.

GENERAL WARREN.

General Warren reached the field before the first attack. I now quote from Frothingham, his biographer, who has rescued every fragment relative to this distinguished and ill-fated personage. "A short time before the action commenced, he was seen in conversation with General Putnam, at the rail-fence, who offered to receive his orders. General Warren declined to give any, but asked where he could be most useful. Putnam directed him to the redoubt, remarking that 'there he would be covered.' 'Don't think,' said Warren, 'I came to seek a place of safety; but tell me where the onset will be most furious.' Putnam still pointed to the redoubt."¹

Here is a distinct tender of the command, and as distinct a declination. General Putnam chose to recognize Warren as his superior, as Prescott afterwards did. The language used is strictly that of an inferior offering the command to a superior. In a volunteer, this would have been a gratuitous assumption. It carries conviction that Putnam considered himself in command. If Putnam were but a volunteer what command should he have tendered to Warren?

General Warren's application to General Putnam shows at least that the former recognized him as the proper person to give him the best information about what was passing on the field of battle. These two men knew precisely what had transpired in the Council of War, of which both were members.

COLONEL GARDNER.

Colonel Thomas Gardner, of Middlesex, Massachusetts, led his regiment to the battle-field. Mr. Frothingham continues to supply evidences of General Putnam's authority. "On arriving at Bunker Hill, General Putnam ordered part of it" (the

¹ "Siege of Boston," p. 170.

regiment) "to assist in throwing up defences commenced at this place." Colonel Gardner was mortally wounded during the battle, and carried off the field. Another Massachusetts officer who obeyed Putnam's orders.¹

CAPTAIN CHESTER.

Captain Chester's company was quartered in the Episcopal Church at Cambridge, within pistol-shot of General Ward's head-quarters. The statement is positively made by Chester that he was ordered to the battle-ground by General Putnam, and none other. He arrived there during the last attack,*and was engaged at the rail-fence. This determines conclusively who gave orders to this detachment of Connecticut troops.² Frothingham says (p. 132): "Putnam ordered on the remainder of the Connecticut troops." I have now mentioned those troops most prominently identified with the battle.

COLONEL SCAMMANS.

Colonel James Scammans was from Maine. He was ordered, presumably by Ward, to go where the fighting was, and moved his command as far as Cobble Hill,—the old name for the eminence on which the McLean Asylum for the Insane now stands. At this point he halted, and, as Mr. Frothingham says, "sent a messenger to General Putnam to inquire whether he was wanted."³ Colonel Scammans, though he did not come on the field, reported to General Putnam.

COLONEL PRESCOTT'S INFLUENCE.

It is difficult to explain the following statement, which Mr. Frothingham gives in support of Prescott's claim to the chief command. "During the battle," he says, "the influence of Colonel Prescott over his men preserved order at his position ; but in other parts of the field the troops fought rather in pla-

¹ "Siege of Boston," p. 179.

² See Captain Chester's letter in Frothingham's Appendix.

³ Ibid. p. 146.

toons, or individually, — companies entirely losing their order, — than under regular commands.” As Mr. Frothingham states that Prescott remained within the redoubt, and there fought the battle, the inference is that disorder existed at the rail-fence, or earthen breastwork, the only other points of defence. In other words, that the defence where Putnam in person commanded, and where Stark, Reed, and Knowlton fought, was disorderly by comparison with that at the redoubt, where Prescott held command.

The defence of the rail-fence should be a sufficient answer to this statement. There the defenders from behind their rampart of hay — so unsubstantial that the bullets of the enemy came through — twice repulsed the choicest troops on the field, and victoriously held their line until the solid earthen embankments of the redoubt were evacuated. The adjoining breastwork was cleared by the enemy’s artillery before the third and last attack. The author quoted says, in another place, that the Americans at the rail-fence “ maintained their ground with great firmness and intrepidity, and successfully resisted every attempt to turn their flank. This line, indeed, was nobly defended. The force here did a great service, for it saved the main body, who were retreating in disorder from the redoubt, from being cut off by the enemy. When it was perceived at the rail-fence that the force under Colonel Prescott had left the hill, these brave men ‘ gave ground, but with more regularity than could have been expected of troops who had been no longer under discipline, and many of whom never before saw an engagement.’ ” Thus it appears that the rail-fence was the last post held, and that the retreat was comparatively orderly, while that from the redoubt was disorderly.

To confirm the idea of Prescott’s holding the chief command, it is alleged that he posted guards, called councils of war, &c. These acts were all performed, and properly, with the means originally confided to him. He called councils of his own subordinates, — not being competent to summon his superiors, — and posted guards from his own command. Every commander of troops exposed to danger does all this, though the posting of a picket does not imply the command of an army.

WHAT PRESCOTT SAYS.

Prescott's letter to John Adams, dated a little more than two months after the battle, gives something tangible as to his own acts. It is brief, and, as he himself characterizes it, "imperfect and too general." He states little or nothing of what occurred except at his own post, which he styles "the fort;" and that little has been given in connection with the troops or movements to which it relates.¹

"On the 16th June, in the evening, I received orders to march to Breed's Hill in Charlestown, with a party of about one thousand men, consisting of three hundred of my own regiment, Colonel Bridge and Lieutenant Brickett, with a detachment of theirs, and two hundred Connecticut forces, commanded by Captain Knowlton. We arrived on the spot; the lines were drawn by the engineer; and we began the intrenchment about twelve o'clock. . . . Having thrown up a small redoubt, found it necessary to draw a line about twenty rods in length from the fort northerly, under a very warm fire from the enemy's artillery. About this time the above field-officers, being indisposed, could render me but little service, and the most of the men under their command deserted the party. . . . About an hour after the enemy landed, they began to march to the attack in three columns. I commanded my Lieutenant-colonel Robinson and Major Woods, each with a detachment, to flank the enemy, who, I have reason to believe, behaved with prudence and courage. I was now left with perhaps one hundred and fifty men within the fort."

Including the extracts heretofore quoted, this constitutes by his own account, all the movements made, or orders given, up to the moment of retreat, by Colonel Prescott. The impression the letter made upon John Adams, to whom it was written, is described in his statement written long after, "that he always understood that General Pomeroy was the first officer of Massachusetts on Bunker or Breed's Hill."² This does

¹ The movements of Stark, Knowlton, and the artillery.

² Letter dated June 19, 1818, in "Columbian Centinel."

not affect General Putnam, who was not a Massachusetts officer; though it certainly does affect Colonel Prescott.

To Colonel Prescott must be awarded the credit of having executed the movement entrusted to him with intelligence, and of having defended his post on the field with great intrepidity. The tax upon his physical endurance did not seem to abate his energy or resolution. He was the right man in the right place. But his was not the mind that controlled the operations of the day.

WHAT DID "OLD PUT" DO?

The following is Mr. Frothingham's *résumé* of General Putnam's movements before and during the battle:¹ "On the evening of June 16th he joined the detachment at Charlestown Neck; took part in the consultation as to the place to be fortified; returned in the night to Cambridge; went to the heights on the firing of the 'Lively,' but immediately returned to Cambridge; went again to the heights about ten o'clock; was in Cambridge after the British landed; ordered on the Connecticut troops, and then went to the heights; was at the rail-fence at the time the action commenced; was in the heat of the battle, and during its continuance made great efforts to induce the reinforcements to advance to the lines; urged labor on works on Bunker Hill; was on the brow of this hill when the retreat took place; retreated with that part of the army that went to Prospect Hill, and remained here during the night."

This statement, in appearance eminently fair, is in reality partial, as it neglects to mention facts that have the most important bearing on this very question of command; namely, the posting of troops on the field and the exercise of command in all parts of it,—functions proper only to an officer commanding the whole field, or acting by his authority.

To this *résumé*, a few circumstances should be added. Putnam was present at the Council of War that planned and ordered the battle; he is thus identified with it from its inception to its close.

¹ "Siege of Boston," p. 169.

He was at least twice at General Ward's head-quarters in consultation with that officer; not only exercised command, but, in one instance, compelled obedience by threatening an officer with death if he disobeyed; was the only mounted officer on the field; visited all the posts, encouraging and, when necessary, aiding,—pointing with his own hands the guns that did such execution upon Howe's troops.¹ In awarding to General Putnam his share of the honors, Mr. Frothingham quotes from Chester's letter the words, "He acts nobly in every thing;" but, inadvertently no doubt, omits what is in fact the essence of the quotation: "Lieutenant Webb says, for God's sake, to urge General Lee and Colonel Washington to join; head officers is what we stand greatly in need of;—we have no acting head here but Putnam: he acts nobly in every thing."

The reader must now decide whether Prescott, who held a particular post, from which he never stirred until forced—who never gave any orders except to his own detachment,—or Putnam, who is shown to have assumed and exercised supreme authority everywhere on the field, was the commander at the battle of Bunker Hill. He was there with the knowledge and approbation of General Ward; was everywhere recognized and obeyed, as far as it was possible for any officer to have been by such raw soldiery as was at his disposal; that he believed himself to have been the commander is not doubted. I will only add the opinion of two of his contemporaries, then serving with the provincial army.

According to Swett, President Stiles, of Yale College, has put in writing that William Ellery, one of the foremost Rhode Island patriots, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, had just shown him a copy of a letter from General Greene at Roxbury,² in which the former said: "General Putnam took possession and intrenched on Bunker Hill, Friday night, 16th

¹ The earliest engraving of the battle in the "Penn'a Magazine" for September, 1775, reproduced by Mr. Frothingham, exhibits Putnam, mounted, as the conspicuous figure of the battle-ground. A large engraving of General Putnam, of the same date, published in London, entitles him the commander at Bunker Hill.

² Greene, as is well known, was in the right wing of Ward's army.

inst." Another letter is cited from a committee of the Rhode Island Chamber of Supplies, then in Cambridge, which states that the "king's troops attacked General Putnam, who defended himself with great bravery, till overpowered and obliged to retreat." Judge Grosvenor, already quoted, in speaking of General Putnam's activity, says, "he directed principally the operations." The statement of General Greene is, of itself, almost sufficient to carry conviction.

Any eulogium of General Putnam would be superfluous. He was a veteran of many campaigns. Beyond question he was the foremost man of that army in embryo which assembled at Cambridge after the battle of Lexington. Not Ward, or Thomas, or Pomeroy, or even the lamented Warren, possessed its confidence to the degree that Putnam did. Mr. Frothingham truly says he "had the confidence of the whole army." Nature formed him for a leader; and men instinctively felt it. This gallant old man, who at nearly threescore put forth such superhuman exertions to achieve victory at Bunker Hill, had a significant interview with his son on the night before the battle, which foreshadows his determination to share its fortunes. On the field he exercised the functions of a general officer, his own colony having invested him, in April, 1775, with the rank of brigadier-general.

He, alone, showed the genius and grasp of a commander there in posting his troops, in his orders during the action, and in his fruitless endeavor to create a new position on Bunker Hill, where the British had begun to intrench on the evening of their retreat from Lexington. With a few brave spirits he turned at bay within cannon-shot of the victorious enemy, while others, stunned by defeat, continued to retire in disorder. In estimating the services of General Putnam and Colonel Prescott, from a military view, the former must receive the award as the commanding officer of the field. When will the people of Massachusetts appropriately honor the memory of her noble son?





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